Traditional Sanctity of Devadasi System: A serious assault on Women Empowerment and sexuality in India

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Abstract

In India, since ancient time period patriarchal approach has led to manifold sufferings to the women in society. They had no access even to the basic rights i.e. they were treated as almost non-existent. Then gradually demand for women empowerment began with as women started realizing their power which resulted in creating their own place in the society whereby no longer they will depend upon the men for their basic requirements or decision making. Freedom scenario and education is very regressive here as they are not allowed to purse even basic education. Indian Constitution has enshrined numerous provisions having same objective as menace like honour killings, domestic violence, dowry, sati and devadasi are in existence at proliferating pace. Irrespective of the Constitutional provisions devadasi system is still in practice in the southern part of the country i.e. Odisha, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. Devadasi/Devaradiyar/Jogins/Basavis/Kalawants/Paravatis/Mathammas means “servant of god”. In this women are given in marriage to God. They lived in or around the temple and perform all the duties at the temples and participate in religious functions. Historically these women held high social status and were well respected, but at present their condition is of sex slave or child prostitutes only. It is a form of the prostitution where parents get their daughters married to God whereby they could not re-marry any ‘mortal’. Almost all of them are from Dalit community with a majority from Madiga and Valmiki castes. Provisions of Indian Penal Code and laws enacted by the states like Bombay, Karnataka and Madras have proved to be redundant. The present research paper will focus on the historical aspect, plight of the one converted into devadasi and the efficacy of the legal provisions to deal with the menace. Further the focus will be to analyse the effects of this practice on the women empowerment.

Key Words- Women, empowerment, devadasi, prostitution.

“I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved.”
Dr.B.R.Ambedkar.

Introduction

Man and women are the foundation stone of the society. Contribution by both is must in productive and reproductive life covering collective responsibilities for the maintenance of household and care and nurturing of the child. Since ancient times women has always been discriminated and to eradicate the same Constitutional scheme has incorporated diverse provisions to ensure women empowerment in different forums i.e. social, economical, political, educational and psychological in the form of fundamental rights and directive principles. Women empowerment means letting her manifest her true self and the same can be attained by uplifting the standard of education and putting to end the social evils existing in the society like Sati, Dowry, Prostitution etc. They should be equipped with the power to take life-determining decisions and to solve varied problems existing in the society. Independence, exposure and self-confidence are the major factor which lead to women empowerment and further assist in the attainment of sustainable development. Education plays major role in empowering women with knowledge, self-confidence and skills and the same was asserted by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights almost 40 years ago that “everyone has right to education.” However though efforts have been made by countries around the world there are approximately 960 million illiterate adults and more surprising fact is that two third of them are women whereby majority of them have no access even to printed knowledge or new technologies which can improve their standard of living.1
Origin of oppressive system

Since centuries this practice has been part of the life of Southern Indian. “Devadasi (Skt. devadasi, Ta. tevataci, lit. ‘slave of god), the term is to be a sanskritized form of the Tamil term tevaratiyil which means a woman who enslaved for the service of some specific deity or sacred object. The word is the feminine form of deva- dasa, a man who is enslaved for the service of a deity.” Regardless of the fact that this term originated in the Sanskrit but the existing customs and practices are nowhere connected to gods or deities mentioned in the Sanskrit literature i.e. Trinity. Trained in classical music and dance, they lived in comfortable accommodations provided by benefactor normally a noticeable man in the village. Normally they were associated with the temple as they perform some type of regular service function in a temple but many a time they provided sexual services to their clients also.  

As they were refereed as religious women in the ancient history they hold divine status and variety of material gifts were offered to them. But gradually this tradition got influenced by Sanskrit tradition in two ways i.e. new myths got generated and promoted and powers of male deity got glorified. Women are being enslaved and oppressed on the name of devadasi system and dalits women are the worse effected. Their position started deteriorating with the intrusion of the Britishers in India and after independence this tradition was made illegal across India and as a result to avoid penal formalities temples themselves publically distanced itself from their plight. Irrespective of the fact that the parents are fully aware about the fate of their daughters they use religion as a shield to unburden themselves of their daughters. Moreover, “it is seen as a means for poverty-stricken parents as money earned is shared.”

Theories related to the system

Origin of the devadasi system can be co-related with theories like “religious tradition theory, racial theory, mother goddess theory, sanskritization theory, political or selfless citizen theory, matriarchy to patriarchy theory, lineage continuation theory and traditional theory.” In ancient time period it was a universal practice to offer women for performing ritual service but major difference can be seen in customs prevailing at different time period in different nations as per their culture. “Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Babylonia and Cyprus” are the prime examples where practice of dedicating women for religious service was in existence and normally this practice can be referred as “theogomy” which is the result of “Mother Goddess worship.”

The myth

Renuka, spouse of wise Jamadagni, was such a pure woman that she could carry water in a freshly moulded pot which she uses to mould every day on the banks of river where she went to fetch water. But one day Gandharva couple was having sex on the river bank and she was struck by the handsome looks of the male Gandharva after seeing the reflection of his naked body in the water. But it was alleged by her husband that she has violated her marital promises and ordered his own son to beheaded her mother who performed the assigned task without any question and getting overwhelmed by the son’s act Sage Jamadagni blessed his son with a boon. The smart son asked his father to bring his mother back to life. “Sage saw matangi pass by and beheaded and her head was attached to the Renuka’s body. Then on getting revived, with the body of a saintly woman and the head of a matangi, Jamadagni wished to make amends for having acted in fury. He blessed her saying that unmarried girls would worship her as their Goddess and these girls would be dedicated to her for the rest of their lives by marrying her and would then be ready to satisfy all sexual demands made on them by her son Parasuram, present as he was, within every man. He further added that girls would look every man a Parasuram in human form and thus have to fulfil all sexual demands without asking for anything in return.”

Types of Devadasis

As India is a land of cultural, religious and ethnic diversity and as a result of this devadasis were represented by several names such as “tevataci, tevaratiyar, pattiyal, talicceri pendukal, tevanar makal,cottikal, atikalmar, manikkattar, kanikkaiyar, emperumanatiyar and koyil pinakkal in Tamilnadu, tevidicchi, nangaimar, kudikkari, muraikkari, kootachi, koothichi, and attakkari in Kerala, suleyar or sule, poti, basavi and jogitis in Karnataka, sanis and bhogam in Andhra Pradesh, darikas, patras and maharis in Orissa, kurmapus and kudipus in Assam, bhavin and kalavant in Konkani and Marathi and in Bombay presidency each shrine had its own name for its girls.”

But Devadasis were divided into seven main categories in the ancient times:
a) Dutta i.e. offering of daughter to temple by the sacred man
b) Hruta, i.e. After getting kidnapped subsequently employ a girl in temple
c) Bikrita, i.e.to sell a girl to the priest or the administrator of the temple
d) Bhrutiya, i.e. to work willingly as devadasi in temple
e) Alankara i.e. to offer women after achieving certain degree of competence
f) Gopika or Rudraganika. i.e. the ones being paid remunerations for offering dance and music in temple and were also offered some property for their personal use.
g) Bhakta i.e. to offer themselves devotionally to serve the temple.

Women empowerment and status of Devadasi system in India

Devadasi system i.e. dedication of girl’s life on the pretext of religion to the God (sex slaves/prostitution) which was rampant in Southern India is still in practice regardless of being made illegal in 1988. Parvatamma 26 years suffering from HIV aids was turned into devadasi at the age of 10 years when she was dedicated to the goddess Yellamma in Saundatti, Southern India which means she cannot marry mortal. On reaching her puberty, as per the rituals of the devadasi system her virginity was sold to highest bidder which resulted in pregnancy at the young age of 14 years. Moreover she was not allowed to meet her daughter and was sent to the red light district in the Mumbai to work and sent money at home.iii Roopa, now 16 was devoted to the goddess 7 years ago on the pretext that Yellamma/Renuka would protect her. “Her virginity was auctioned in the village and since then she is meeting the financial needs of her family by working as prostitute in a village near by Saundatti.”

It is just one of the glaring example of the prevalence of menace of devadasi system in India irrespective of the fact that the same has been outlawed in India. Media reports about rituals performed in Tiruvallur district in Tamil Nadu, Chittor, Andhra Pradesh have raised questions about the popularity of the historical devadasi system.iv

Issues and challenges faced by the Devadasi’s in India

Future of the Devadasis is uncertain as once they are around the age of 40-45 i.e. the point when they are no longer considered attractive, they try to meet their livelihood by becoming jogthis or begging near the temples.

Chennawa a blind of 65 years is forced to live on the left over food provided by the devotees. She was turned to devadasi at the age of 12 by her mother ho herself was devadasi. In the beginning she was happy as she presumed that Yellamma has blessed her. She supported her entire family, then got rapped and kicked and now has nothing to support her.

“One of the most dangerous threats for Devadasis is AIDS. Pratibha Desai (2007) opines that as it is an evil where many backward women are exploited in the name of religion and is a major cause of spread of HIV Aids.‘Being women with multiple sexual partners, awareness on issues of personal hygiene is very low. Consequently, most of the women suffer from 62 reproductive tract infections and sexually transmitted diseases.’”v

Present position

An organisation named Vimochana founded by BL Patil has reported that notwithstanding ban on dedication ceremonies, this evil is still in practice as families and priests conduct them in secret and the same can be supported by the report of National Commission for Women according to the estimate of which 48,358 is the current count of devadasis in India.

For some Scheduled Caste communities this tradition has become a source of earning and the priests are conducting the secret ceremonies for them in their own houses. Devadasis lead intolerable live all over India as they have been made subjected to hard-hearted suppression and injustice in the male dominated society. “Majority of them were dedicated as servant of God by the poor parents unable to pay their future dowries and with hopes that a pleased goddess would bless them with boy in the next pregnancy.”

Since centuries they have been made part of stigmatized social evil. They are not allowed to marry or to work outside temple and hence have spent their lives decorating the temples, singing and dancing, telling devotional stories and gathering coins from the worshippers to support their daily life.
Sufferings of Devadasis has no end irrespective of the fact that Clause 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has provided that “no one shall be held in slavery or servitude, slavery and slave trade shall be prohibited in all the forms”. Moreover, India is bound to stop any practice “where a child is handed over for exploitative purposes as it is a signatory to United Nation Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery, 1956.”

**Legal framework prohibiting Devadasi system**

In 1924 attempt was made by the Indian Government to eradicate this practice when devotion of girls for the purpose of prostitution was made illegal. Following the same state suffering from the same i.e. southern states passed various laws to outlaw this practice. First such Act was passed by state of Bombay in 1934 i.e. Bombay Devadasi Protection Act (“Bombay Act”) making this practice as illegal regardless of the fact that whether girl was devoted with or without consent. In the twentieth century similar regional laws were enacted including “the Madras Devadasi (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947, the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Act of 1982, the Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act of 1988, and, most recently, the Maharashtra Devadasi (Abolition of Dedication) Bill of 2005.” Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act and Section 370 and 370A as amended by Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013 and section 372 of Indian Penal Code prohibits the practice of devadasi system in India.

**Conclusion**

Position which women held in the ancient India gradually suffered a setback when they were turned into the objects of pleasure to serve male dominated society which resulted into loss of their individual identity, basic human rights. Achievement of women empowerment has been proved to be a day dream in light of the failure of the various schemes of government directed towards eradicating social evils from the society and one leading example of the same is existence of devadasi system still in southern and the western part of India. Factors like pressure of religion, economic necessity and social construction are still boasting up this evil to spread further. The same has been pointed by the Supreme Court in “Vishal Jeet vs. Union of India And Ors, that in spite of stringent and rehabilitative provisions of law under various Acts, it cannot be said that the desired results had been achieved and called for evaluation of the existing measures by both the central and state governments.” After this judicial activism has tried to curb it notably Madras High Court has given various rulings against this practice. Acting quickly in a PIL filed by a NGO named as F L Foundation that devadasi dedication will take place at the Uttarang Mala Durga Temple in Karnataka on February 13, 2014 directions were issued to the Chief Secretary of Karnataka to take all steps to prevent women from being forced to be dedicated as devadasis and protect their human and fundamental rights as enshrined in the Constitution of India.

But judicial activism alone will not be sufficient enough to ensure valuable rights to women and for the same effective implementation of legal provisions is mandatory. Government should take steps like rehabilitation programs ensuring counselling and awareness, to provide financial assistance to those who will marry devadasis and to provide reservation to the devadasis.

Though journey to eradicate this system has been jerky and challenging but optimism still hangs high. Many NGO’s are continuing their fight against this outrageous system by working towards growing the awareness of the ignorant. Even HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases are not acting as a hindrance in achieving their goal so that women empowerment can be gained in reality and not on piece of paper.
“There are two powers in the world; one is the sword and the other is the pen. There is a great competition and rivalry between the two. There is a third power stronger than both, that of the women.”

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